

## The Library

The old stories, the ones from before it happened, call this place London. They described it as a mighty old city, full of history, heroes, and a wealth of tales. I can't find any of those things here now. Only death lives here now. Death and darkness.

Something happened decades ago: an apocalypse, Armageddon, Ragnarok, whatever you want to call it. I've heard about monsters and fires from the sky and myths becoming real, but people don't really talk about the event itself, most don't really know about it. Great-uncle Anthony was the only one who could tell me anything. "A lot of people died Michael. Most weren't prepared for how it changed the world. A lot of knowledge was lost in an instant. Besides, there are not many people like me who witnessed it and are still alive." Uncle was always grave after I got him to tell me anything about the event. He preferred it when I kept my questions limited to the early, dark days afterward.

Literally dark days. Anything electrical had just ceased working, so the nights and days in the Amboni caves were dark. "We lit fires of course," Uncle would say. "Ah, but those fires could never compare to the constant, orange glow of the street lights we used to have, Michael."

Now, decades after it happened, we've established a life again, complete with what Uncle called chores. During the days, a group of us kids would be sent out to the shoreline to see what the nighttime waves had left for us. We would dig for clams where we could, check the tidal pools, and walk up and down the shore collecting the bits of flotsam brought in by the tides. These bits of the old world would find new life in our dark world. Necessity gave birth to a wealth of inventions as humanity did what it does best: survive.

At night, when the evening meal had been eaten, and all the final chores finished, we would sit around the fires and listen as stories were told. Sometimes they would be read from old, worn books. More often than not though, they would be told from memory; sometimes fables, sometimes classics, sometimes family stories. All of them fueled our imaginations and gave us a few glimmers of hope to cling to.

Great-uncle Anthony told the best stories. The other uncles and aunties would tell me that before it happened, Anthony had never been able to sit still. He was always going, always traveling. They said that even back then, Anthony told the best stories. It was Anthony that told the stories about London. He would read classic stories about London during an ancient time named after some old Queen. He would tell us urban legends about the city, dramatizing the tale to suit the subject.

"Tell me children," he would begin, his voice a careful stage whisper. "Have you heard the tale of the train of the dead? In old London, they had tunnels full of trains, but one was a secret. It was reserved for the dead, and it carried them to their final rest."

Another story began much differently.

“Beware the fog!” he would shout, shocking one of the dozing uncles back awake in the process. “The fog hides Spring-Heeled Jack!” he would cry and leap to his feet. “Jack can leap to the top of the house in a single bound, and his evil, red eyes can see your very soul!”

The aunties made Anthony handle any nightmares after that story.

My favorite stories though, were about the Secret Library. Uncle sometimes called it the Hidden Archive or the Sanctuary. He claimed that it was built by the old royal family with the help of four men who never aged. “Every single book, Michael. Every last one sat on the shelves down in Sanctuary.” Uncle said in a wistful voice. “They were treasures saved from the destruction of time. Scrolls from Alexandria, tablets from Babylon, books from Iram, the City of Pillars. And only a select few knew about them.” Uncle claimed that he was friends with one of the younger princes of the family, and the prince got him access to the library, and even took him down there on his first visit. This is where my idea came from.

Great-uncle Anthony left the Amboni community a few days after we celebrated my 12th year. He was still fit and strong from always helping with the crops. He planned to go find some other survivors and try to trade for some useful skills or resources. Six years later and we still hadn’t heard anything from him. During the intervening years, Uncle’s stories stayed with me. I would dream about adventures in narrow, fog-filled alleys. I’d chase down criminals, protect royals, and attend grand events held in the homes of lords and ladies. I knew they were fantasies, but they gave me hope.

I knew from all of the stories we told at night that humanity had survived in darkness before. The older members of our little community would teach us lessons in story, and they showed us basic skills with clever little rhymes. A library buried deep under a city, and unknown to most people, would likely be more or less intact. Well, at least not as thoroughly plundered as the ones in nearby Tanga. The Secret Library, I thought, might hold some secrets about how to survive. From where Uncle described the location of the city, on an enormous island far to the north, I thought I could make it there in four or five months. If I left just after the height of summer, I thought I could be back before the heat had fully returned again.

I had always idolized Uncle, and when I told my parents my idea, my mother shook her head. “Oh Michael, you were always bound to run off someday, off on some adventure like Tony.” My dad disliked the idea. He thought I should stay and help out in a more physical way. “You are the best at finding what we need here. You don’t even know if this London is still there. Tony didn’t even know if it survived.” The worst blow came from my little sister, Anna. “Don’t go Mikey. I don’t want you to go like Unca did.” She nearly persuaded me, but I was determined.

I threw myself into working around the community in the weeks leading up to my departure. I made sure that the younger kids knew where all the best spots were for fishing and hunting, and where I had always found the best things washed up on the shore. As the heat set in outside our caves, I set myself to making sure that all of my hunting and trapping gear was cleaned, sharpened, and ready to go. I borrowed the few books we had that held any kind of map and tried to assemble a more complete view of where I would be heading. I had wandered pretty far afield

with some of the older boys as I had grown up. We had walked all the way to what Uncle called the Savannah a few times, so I had a functional knowledge of what the first weeks of my trip would be like. I was ready and eager to depart.

The heat climbed and climbed. Uncle used to say that the Amboni caves we lived in were very close to the middle of the world, and that it just stayed hotter here than in most places. "But," he would say, with a twinkle in his eye. "We do not live on the equator itself, so the heat will always give way to a cooler time." This year, like every other, it did just that.

I had gone to some great lengths to make sure that when I left I would have food with me without leaving the community wanting. They all saw me off at first light. The aunties and uncles said some prayers, advice was given, and tears shed. Anna clung tightly to me, her tears soaking my coat. "Promise you'll come home Mikey. Promise!" her muffled voice sobbed out. I hugged her and promised I would come back with some grand stories of my own to tell her.

The trip went by. My preparations served me well, and the time I spent wandering with my uncle and my friends saved me more times than I care to count. Near an ancient city called Giers, I traded some skins for a ride across a Strait. The boatman called the ocean on one side the Lanti and on the other side the Sea of Gods. I finally arrived at another sea over four months after I left. I found a small community called Graveline that had survived mainly by fishing. They called the sea the Chunnel. They said that someone had seen it on a sign. I traded some time spent mending their boats and nets and lines for a trip across the Chunnel.

When they dropped me off on the other side, they asked how I planned to get back across. I must admit, I hadn't given any thought to my return trip. I was so focused on making it to the city that I hadn't looked far enough ahead to plan a way home. They saw my hesitance, and offered to come back in two weeks, and then once again two more weeks after that. I thanked them profusely and made a promise to myself to find something of use to them to repay their kindness. Now, however, I'm simply concerned about surviving.

The city wasn't hard to find. The fishermen of Graveline knew of it, and dropped me as close as they dared. "There's something in them ruins that ain't right." The Captain of the boat had said. "Something old and mad. It came out of the earth way back and took to hating people. I hear it hunts anyone who crosses into its city." A deep dread filled me when I heard that. Back home, we had dealt with beasts and I had fought more than one on my journey, but nothing as unnatural as this creature sounded.

I've been in the city for a few days now, trying to make sense of Great-uncle Anthony's stories and the ruined state of the city now. It's a maze of collapsed buildings, and demolished pathways. I haven't even run into any sign of human settlements in the ruins. Not that I blame them. This city doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like people are meant to live here.

Or maybe the creature just got them all.

A few days ago I made my first breakthrough. I'd been in the old palace that Uncle used to mention visiting, and I poked around in almost every room looking for something to point me towards the library. I had just about given up, and assumed that such a secret would remain hidden forever. In my frustration, I slammed an old book I had been skimming onto an old desk. Maybe it was the age of the desk, or the sorry condition it was in, but whatever the reason, a panel dropped out from the underside of the desk. Inside was this mostly empty journal I'm writing in now. It was apparently begun by an old friend of the royals who called himself "Octavian" and it mentions a secret entrance to the Sanctuary.

Sanctuary. That was one of the names for Uncle Anthony's Secret Library.

In the journal, which mentions several other, older journals written by the same person, the author mentions that he used a secret passage into the library that was located somewhere "...behind Havelock, under the watchful eyes of Nelson's lions." I've been searching the city ever since, and I think I've found it.

But I think I've been found as well. Something has been stalking me ever since I searched the old tower prison. I haven't gotten a good glimpse of it, but I've heard it at night, prowling around wherever I make camp. I've seen its glowing red eyes at night. I've decided to leave this journal here in one of the few intact buildings near where I think the secret entrance is. I'm planning on picking this up on my way back to the shore. I'm looking out at Nelson's lions right now as I'm writing this, and I pray that I can find the entrance quickly. I think the creature stalking me is growing bored of the game.

If you find this journal, I'm leaving my map tucked inside of it, as well as a few loose pages with some details of my journey. If you find this, please take it to my sister Anna if you can. Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise.

The sun is finally breaking over the ruins of the city. It's time for me to go. The Library awaits.